

A Comparison and Contrast of the Speaking Styles of Lincoln and Douglas

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Few historical rivalries are more dramatic than that between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas. Aside from their physical differences, the two men were quite similar. Both were migrants to Illinois, both were self-made men, and both agreed on almost all of the issues of the day, except for slavery. Their physical differences, however, were obvious. Lincoln had no desire to impress people by his appearance. His clothes were dusty and looked as if they had not been ironed. His coat was washed-out and short at the sleeves, and his wrinkled face gave a feeling of somberness, if not melancholy. Douglas, on the other hand, thick-set and short, dressed immaculately. He appeared self-confident and secure. As one bystander described him, “[Douglas’ stride] was the walk of a man who knew where he was and how to get there.”

In addition to their physical differences, the two men had different speaking styles. Douglas, when warmed to a subject, let words rush out in an unbroken stream. Lincoln, however, spoke slowly and carefully, choosing each of his words. Cautiously, Lincoln spoke without any noticeable hesitation, but he lacked the ease and fluidity of Douglas. Douglas, moreover, was quick to answer a question, while Lincoln required time to gather his thoughts. According to a reporter for a Chicago newspaper, “[Lincoln] never failed to find his footing and maintain it firmly when he found it.”

Lincoln, however, had two unique advantages during the debates. First, he was the underdog when compared to Douglas’ national reputation, making it easier for Lincoln to appeal to the public’s sympathy. Second, his speeches and opinions were

fresh, whereas Douglas had already delivered his ideas many times before. Douglas' campaign was also better organized and better financed than Lincoln's.

Their differences could not be more apparent than in the Lincoln-Douglas Debates, a series of seven public appearances that would determine who would represent Illinois in the U. S. Senate. Aside from personal attacks, Lincoln and Douglas mostly argued over slavery. Douglas insisted that Lincoln was an abolitionist, attempting to introduce racial equity. Lincoln responded that the Declaration of Independence proclaimed "All men are created equal," a statement which applied to blacks as well as white. In addition, Lincoln argued that the federal government should prevent the spread of slavery in order to "place it on the course of ultimate extinction." Lincoln walked a very fine line in his debate speeches between removing slavery and granting political rights to African Americans. He had to indicate that slavery was ethically wrong, but he could not openly advocate granting full political rights to African Americans. Doing so would jeopardize votes from the southern pro-slavery portion of the state. Douglas also walked the same line for the same reason.

Douglas' solution to slavery was popular sovereignty, whereby each new territory would decide for itself whether to legalize slavery. This concept appealed on two fronts: it removed the fight from Congress, where earlier arguments had become sour and threatened to stop all other work, and it ensured that most new territories would abolish slavery. Lincoln claimed that he acted from a higher set of values than Douglas: he abhorred slavery while Douglas often emphasized its practical value. Douglas frequently cited the U. S. Constitution; Lincoln referred to the Declaration of Independence and its ideal of racial equality.

Although Lincoln and Douglas were similar in many ways, they came from different political backgrounds. While Douglas attempted to impress people with his appearance and speaking ability, Lincoln dismissed how his appearance influenced others. Their opinions on issues of the day were similar, even though they had differing means of dealing with slavery. [From Gerald Mortimer Capers, *Stephen A. Douglas, Defender of the Union*; Charles H. Coleman, *The Lincoln-Douglas Debate at Charleston, Illinois*; David Herbert Donald and Harold Holzer eds., *Lincoln in the Times: The Life of Abraham Lincoln, as originally reported in the New York Times*; and Edward Finch, *The Lincoln-Douglas Debates*. The Lincoln-Douglas Society. <<http://www.lincoln-douglas.org>> (Sept. 9. 2007).]